Navigating Challenges Behind the Story: Investigative Journalism in Khulna's Print Media Landscape

Tehosin Ashraf Prottoy[a], Mamunor Rashid[b]*, Sara Monami Hossain[b]

[a]Hallym University, South Korea, [b]Khulna University, Bangladesh

ABSTRACT

Investigative journalism is crucial in promoting transparency, accountability, and democratic governance. However, this study reveals that investigative journalists working in print media in Khulna City, the third-largest urban center in Bangladesh, face significant institutional, political, and economic barriers that hinder their ability to conduct impactful reporting. Through qualitative data collected via 18 in-depth interviews and one focus group discussion involving a total of 24 journalists from local and national newspapers, the study identifies key challenges including lack of logistical and financial support, legal harassment under the Digital Security Act (2018), editorial gatekeeping, political pressure, and limited access to information through the Right to Information Act. The findings highlight how regional journalists are systematically marginalized, receiving fewer resources and less recognition than their Dhaka-based counterparts. The political economy of media and agenda-setting theory provides practical frameworks for understanding how ownership structures, editorial biases, and commercial interests shape the visibility and viability of investigative reports. This study contributes to the existing literature by focusing on the underexplored regional dynamics of investigative journalism in South Asia. It also offers practical recommendations for strengthening the profession through policy reform, institutional support, and professional development initiatives.

Introduction

Investigative journalism globally experienced significant growth after the fall of communism in 1989 (Jurrat et al., 2017). It plays a crucial role in democratic countries by enhancing accountability and transparency, fighting corruption, exposing organized crime, strengthening civil society, fueling reform, and advocating for justice (Nogara, 2009). However, global investigative journalism faces formidable challenges due to the rise of authoritarianism worldwide, with leaders increasingly exploiting digital platforms for political control and societal manipulation (Almania, 2017). According to the Global Investigative Journalism Network (GIJN, 2019), an authoritarian mindset is growing in developing nations and traditionally democratic societies, posing a threat to free press and independent reporting.

CONTACT

Tehosin Ashraf Prottoy (B.S.S., Khulna University, Bangladesh) is currently a graduate student at the Department of Communication, Hallym University, South Korea.

Mamunor Rashid (M.S.S., University of Dhaka, Bangladesh) is Associate Professor, Mass Communication and Journalism Discipline, Khulna University, Bangladesh.

Sara Monami Hossain (M.Phil., University of Dhaka, Bangladesh) is Associate Professor, Mass Communication and Journalism Discipline, Khulna University, Bangladesh.

*Corresponding author's email: mrashid@mcj.ku.ac.bd

In Bangladesh, the media landscape has evolved significantly since the country's independence in 1971. While print media remains one of the oldest and most influential forms of journalism (Weis, 1986), it currently struggles to maintain a robust presence in investigative reporting. The print sector has expanded rapidly over the past two decades, with hundreds of newspapers operating at national and regional levels (Rahman, 2012). Despite this growth, the volume and quality of investigative reports remain alarmingly low, mainly due to systemic constraints related to ownership structures, funding models, and editorial policies.

Media ownership in Bangladesh is highly concentrated, with many outlets owned or influenced by powerful business conglomerates or political entities (Rahman, 2015). This concentration limits editorial independence and often prioritizes commercial or political interests over public accountability. Furthermore, the government exerts indirect influence through regulatory frameworks such as the Digital Security Act (2018), which has been widely criticized for curbing freedom of expression and intimidating journalists (Rashid & Rahman, 2020).

Investigative journalism in Bangladesh began its journey in the 1950s during the pre-independence era (Rahman, 2006). Notable early reports include *"Nishidho Pallir Kahini"* by Salimullah, which exposed the harsh conditions faced by sex workers, and *"Commission on Commission"* by Shahidul Haq, which highlighted irregularities in commission appointments (Rahman, 1993). After independence, investigative journalism gained momentum, exemplified by Abed Khan's *"Open Secret"* published in *The Daily Ittefaq*, which led to the dismissal of the director general of the Bangladesh Rifles. Despite such landmark investigations, mainstream newspapers have often neglected their watchdog role, particularly in exposing corporate wrongdoing (Rahman, 2012). Journalists today face numerous professional and institutional barriers, especially those working outside Dhaka. These include inadequate wages, lack of job security, limited access to information, legal threats, and insufficient support from media houses (Ismail et al., 2017; Rahman, 2012). Local-level investigative stories often fail to gain national attention due to editorial gatekeeping, where Dhaka-based offices dominate news agendas. Despite these obstacles, investigative journalism remains vital for promoting transparency, accountability, and social change.

While research on investigative journalism has expanded across broadcast and digital platforms, there remains a significant gap in studies focusing specifically on print media, particularly at the regional level (Regmi, 2019). To address this gap, this study investigates the challenges print media journalists face in investigative reporting in Khulna City, Bangladesh's third-largest urban center. Unlike previous works focusing on national-level practices, this study sheds light on underexplored issues affecting regional journalists and offers insights into how the profession can be strengthened.

The study explores the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the significant challenges investigative journalism faces in Khulna City, particularly in the context of print media?

RQ2: How do media house policies and practices contribute to these challenges?

RQ3: What types of pressures do investigative journalists face from political, social, and commercial groups, and how can these challenges be addressed?

By drawing on first-hand accounts from local and national journalists, this study aims to enhance understanding of the structural and institutional constraints that hinder investigative journalism in rural and regional settings. It seeks to inform policy discussions and capacity-building initiatives to support investigative reporting in Bangladesh's evolving media ecosystem.

Literature Review

Investigative journalism is inherently complex, shaped by institutional constraints, socio-political pressures, and professional vulnerabilities that vary across geographic and political contexts. To better understand these dynamics, this literature review organizes existing research into thematic clusters: legal risks, financial insecurity, censorship, and institutional barriers, offering a more coherent and analytically rigorous synthesis of global findings.

Legal Risks and Barriers to Information Access

A recurring challenge across multiple regions is the lack of legal protections and the increasing criminalization of investigative journalism. Studies from Saudi Arabia (Almania, 2017), Malaysia (Ismail et al., 2017), and Bangladesh (Rahman, 2012) highlight how journalists face legal threats, including defamation lawsuits, arrests under restrictive laws, and government surveillance. In China, Tong (2020) found that investigative reporters often resort to informal networks to share sources and evidence due to fear of prosecution. Similarly, in Nepal, Regmi (2019) noted that journalists frequently encounter bureaucratic hurdles when accessing public records, undermining their ability to conduct thorough investigations.

Financial Constraints and Lack of Institutional Support

Financial insecurity remains a systemic issue affecting investigative journalism globally, particularly in the Global South. Anyadike (2013) reported that Nigeria's limited funding and a lack of editorial support have led to minimal investigative output. In Bangladesh, Rahman (2015) identified insufficient media house investment in logistics, training, and incentives as key obstacles. Journalists often bear the cost of investigations themselves, limiting their capacity to pursue long-term stories. This trend is mirrored in Nepal (Regmi, 2019) and Sri Lanka (Rasmin & Raguram, 2017), where low wages and job instability further deter reporters from engaging in resource-intensive investigative work.

Censorship and Editorial Control

Political influence and editorial gatekeeping severely restrict the scope and reach of investigative reporting. In Saudi Arabia, Almania (2017) found that political overdependence and editorial bias significantly reduce the publication of investigative reports. In Malaysia, Ismail et al. (2017) revealed that journalists operate under a controlled media environment, where editorial policies suppress critical narratives. A similar pattern exists in Bangladesh, where Rahman (2012) observed that private media companies often prioritize commercial interests or align with political agendas, resulting in manipulated news content.

Institutional and Professional Challenges

The absence of formal training, professional development opportunities, and safety mechanisms further undermines the sustainability of investigative journalism. Jurrat et al. (2017) highlighted a widespread lack of training programs for journalists in Sub-Saharan Africa, Eastern Europe, and South America. Bisilki and Opoku (2019) emphasized the physical and psychological risks faced by Ghanaian journalists conducting high-stakes investigations. In Sri Lanka, Rasmin and Raguram (2017) identified poor media pluralism and lack of editorial support as additional institutional barriers.

Theoretical Underpinning

Investigative journalists' challenges in Khulna's print media landscape are deeply embedded in structural and institutional dynamics, which can be effectively analyzed through the lenses of the political economy of media and agenda-setting theory. These frameworks provide critical insights into how media ownership structures, economic dependencies, political pressures, and editorial decision-making shape the production and visibility of investigative journalism.

Political Economy of Media

The political economy of media theory offers a robust analytical tool for understanding how macro-level forces—such as ownership patterns, funding models, and political affiliations—influence journalistic practices and news content (McChesney, 2008). In the context of Bangladesh, particularly in regional cities like Khulna, this framework helps explain why investigative journalism struggles to thrive despite its democratic importance.

Media organizations in Bangladesh are often owned or influenced by powerful business conglomerates or political entities (Rahman, 2015). This concentration of ownership limits editorial independence and prioritizes commercial or political interests over public accountability. For instance, several respondents in this study reported that their media houses discouraged them from publishing reports that could offend advertisers or politically connected individuals due to fears of financial or legal repercussions (Islam et al., 2024).

Moreover, the reliance on advertising revenue and government subsidies further restricts the autonomy of media outlets. Kenton (2019) notes that media policies are often shaped by economic considerations rather than journalistic ethics or public interest. This dynamic is evident in the reluctance of local newspapers to support costly investigative projects or defend journalists facing legal threats under laws like the Digital Security Act (2018).

Economic vulnerability exacerbates institutional constraints in Khulna, where most journalists lack formal training and work under precarious employment conditions. Editors and owners prioritize short-term gains over long-term investments in quality journalism, resulting in minimal incentives, poor logistical support, and limited recognition for investigative reporting.

Agenda-setting Theory

Agenda-setting theory complements the political economy framework by explaining how media institutions determine what issues receive attention and remain invisible to the public (Davie & Maher, 2006). According to this theory, the media reflects reality and actively shapes it by highlighting specific topics while marginalizing others.

This concept is highly relevant in the case of Khulna, where local investigative stories struggle to gain national traction. National dailies based in Dhaka dominate the agenda-setting process, sidelining regional concerns even when they have national implications. Respondents

noted that reports from Khulna were often cut, altered, or omitted unless they aligned with the central office's editorial priorities.

Furthermore, gatekeeping behavior by sub-editors and senior management reinforces this imbalance. Local reports are filtered through layers of editorial control that may alter or dilute their impact. One journalist noted, "Reports from our branch rarely reach the editor unless they involve high-profile issues" (Respondent 21). Additionally, political and commercial pressures shape content prioritization. Investigative reports exposing corruption or challenging powerful groups are often suppressed or delayed. This aligns with agenda-setting assumptions that media institutions do not just reflect public opinion but actively construct what is deemed important or newsworthy (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Integration of Theories in the Analysis

By integrating both theories, this study reveals how structural and institutional factors interact to constrain investigative journalism in Khulna: Media ownership (political economy) determines editorial independence, resource allocation, and risk tolerance, directly affecting whether investigative journalism is supported or suppressed. Editorial gatekeeping and content prioritization (agenda-setting) explains why local investigative stories are marginalized and how national narratives dominate public discourse. Commercial Interests and Political Affiliations act as overlapping constraints that limit journalists' autonomy, reinforcing a cycle of self-censorship and declining investigative output.

These theoretical insights offer a deeper understanding of how systemic inequalities and power relations affect journalism practice at the regional level. They also underscore the need for reforms in media governance, editorial policies, and journalist training to strengthen print media's role in promoting transparency and accountability.

Synthesis and Research Gap

While these studies offer valuable insights into the challenges of investigative journalism across diverse settings, most focus on national-level practices. Few examine the experiences of regional or local journalists, who often face compounded difficulties such as marginalization, limited recognition, and inadequate support from central offices (e.g., Dhaka-based media houses in Bangladesh). This study addresses this gap by focusing on Khulna City, investigating how structural inequalities at the local level shape the practice and sustainability of investigative journalism in print media.

Methodology

Study Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the challenges investigative journalists face in Khulna City, Bangladesh, particularly within the print media sector. The qualitative approach was chosen to gain in-depth insights into the lived experiences, professional constraints, and institutional barriers encountered by journalists in their reporting practices. Data were collected using two complementary methods: in-depth interviews and focus group discussions.

The use of in-depth interviews allowed for individual storytelling, enabling participants to express sensitive or personal experiences related to investigative journalism that might not be shared openly in a group setting. This method was beneficial for understanding internal motivations, fears, ethical dilemmas, and personal risks associated with investigative reporting.

On the other hand, focus group discussions facilitated the exploration of shared perceptions, collective challenges, and institutional dynamics within the media industry. FGDs enabled discussion among journalists, editors, and senior reporters regarding systemic issues such as editorial gatekeeping, political pressure, and lack of support from media houses. Using both methods ensured methodological triangulation, enhancing the credibility and depth of findings (Saunders et al., 2007).

Research Participants and Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling was employed to select journalists with direct experience in investigative reporting in Khulna City. According to the general secretary of Khulna Press Club, approximately 120 registered journalists are working in print media in Khulna, with 40 working for national dailies and 80 for local newspapers. All these individuals formed the study's population. A total of 24 participants were selected for data collection, comprising 18 respondents for in-depth interviews and six for the focus group discussion. No female journalists are registered in Khulna working in print media, so only male participants were included (see Appendix for demographic characteristics and list of journalists participating in the in-depth interviews and focus group discussion).

Data Collection

In-depth interviews were conducted face-to-face, via phone, or via video conferencing, depending on participants' availability and comfort. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and an hour. A semi-structured interview guide was used to ensure consistency while

allowing flexibility for participants to elaborate on emerging themes.

The focus group discussion involved six experienced journalists from national and local dailies. The session followed the same interview guide used in the in-depth interviews and lasted approximately one and a half hours. The discussions were recorded (with consent), transcribed verbatim, and analyzed alongside the interview data.

All participants provided informed consent before participation. Anonymity was ensured by assigning numerical codes (e.g., Respondent 1; Respondent 2) instead of using real names. Interviews were recorded only with explicit permission and transcribed confidentially to maintain confidentiality.

Data Analysis

Following transcription, the data were analyzed using manual thematic coding. First, open coding was applied to identify initial categories and patterns from the transcripts. These were then grouped into broader themes aligned with the research questions. Peer debriefing was conducted with academic supervisors to enhance validity and reliability, and member checking was performed during the focus group discussion to confirm interpretations and clarify ambiguities.

Themes were organized around the following areas: Legal and political pressures, Media house policies and gatekeeping behavior, Economic and institutional constraints, Ethical dilemmas and personal risks, and Regional disparities and recognition gaps. These themes were further categorized under individual, organizational, and structural factors to clarify and facilitate policy recommendations.

Findings

The findings of this study reveal that investigative journalists working in Khulna City, Bangladesh, face a complex web of challenges at individual, organizational, and structural levels. These barriers significantly hinder their ability to conduct in-depth reporting and maintain journalistic independence. The results are organized thematically based on the three research questions:

A. Individual-level Challenges: RQ1: What are the significant challenges investigative journalism faces in Khulna City, particularly in the context of print media?

1. Lack of Education and Professional Training

Most journalists interviewed lacked formal education in journalism or related fields. Only one respondent held a degree in journalism, while the majority had only a higher secondary or graduate-level education without specialized training in investigative reporting. "*Even most journalists in national and local media houses do not have a bachelor's or equivalent degree*" (Respondent 2). "*Those with a journalism educational background would have performed better than others*" (Respondent 3).

This aligns with global findings that emphasize the importance of professional development in enhancing journalists' capacity to handle investigative assignments (Jurrat et al., 2017; Regmi, 2019). Respondents also highlighted that media houses rarely offer training or workshops on investigative reporting, leaving journalists to rely on informal learning or self-study. "*Media houses do not arrange any training or seminars on investigative reporting*" (Respondent 4). "*There is no scope for us to attend technical skill-related training*" (Respondent 6).

2. Ethical Dilemmas and Personal Risks

Investigative journalists frequently face ethical dilemmas, particularly when reporting on individuals with whom they have personal connections. "*We try our best to remain neutral, but sometimes it is difficult to report against close ones*" (Respondents 10 & 12). Moreover, respondents reported facing death threats, physical assaults, lawsuits, and legal notices, particularly when covering politically or financially sensitive topics. "*I was physically injured and received death threats while making an investigative story*" (Respondent 5). "*Many journalists have been arrested under the Digital Security Act*" (Respondent 11). These findings reflect broader patterns observed in other regions where journalists operate under high-risk conditions (Bisilki & Opoku, 2019; Rahman, 2012).

3. Low Salaries and Job Insecurity

Financial instability became a recurring concern among local and national newspaper reporters. "*Reporters from local newspapers earn between BDT 5,000-7,500 per month*" (Respondent 8). "*National dailies pay between BDT 15,000-25,000, but even that is insufficient*" (Respondent 1). Additionally, many journalists work without job security and fear being fired anytime. "*We do not have any job security and can be fired anytime*" (Respondents 1, 10, and 18). This economic vulnerability reduces motivation and limits the capacity to pursue long-term

investigative projects (Ismail et al., 2017; Rahman, 2015).

B. Challenging Factors: RQ2: How do media house policies and practices contribute to these challenges?

**Lack of education and professional training**

Figure 1 shows that education is essential to cope with investigative reporting. There are no reporters with a journalism-related educational background except one respondent. Most journalists who have only higher secondary degrees face more challenges. Those who have a graduate degree or more face comparatively fewer challenges. Figure 2 shows that journalists who have participated in professional training sessions in journalism at least a few times can adeptly handle those challenges compared to those with less experience.

Figure 1: Education Levels of Participants
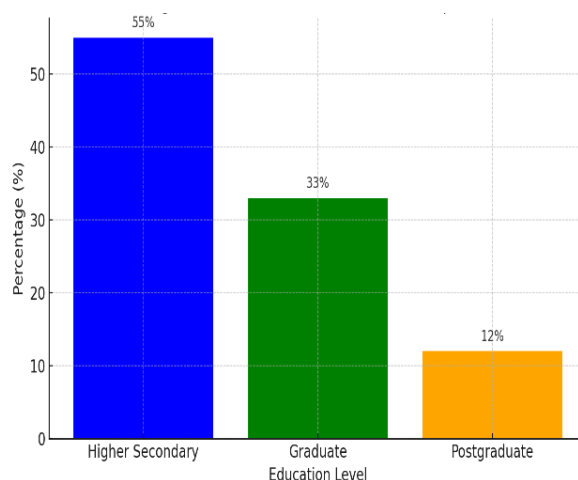
Figure 2: Impact of Training on Handling Ability
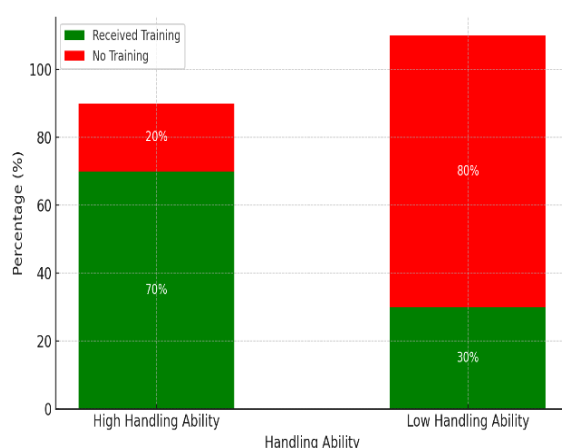
Behavior of Media House

Figure 3 shows that most media houses' policies cannot strongly encourage their reporters to pursue investigative reporting. Almost all respondents reported not getting support in any form, including logistics and equipment support, as well as 72% and 88% monetary incentives, respectively. Due to inadequate resources, media houses prioritize only national issues and are ready to invest in them based on their priorities and interests. Most respondents complain that their head office does not treat them equally to their colleagues in the Dhaka office.

Figure 3: Media House Support
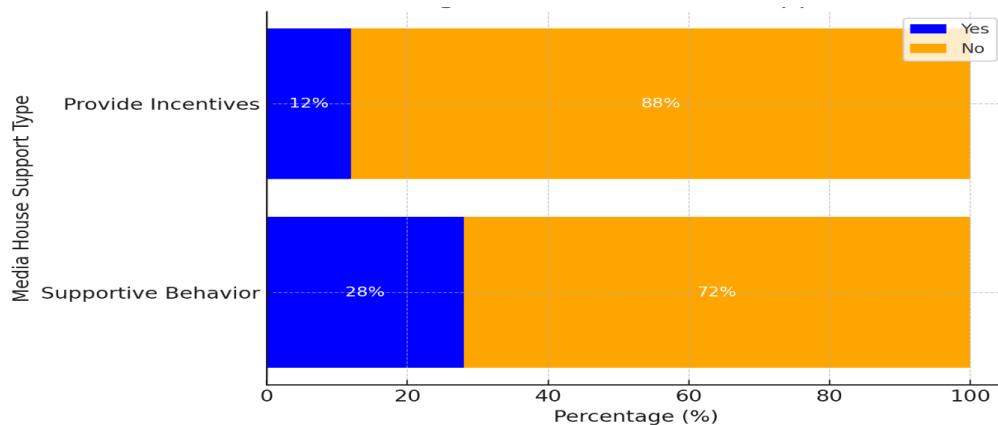
C. Organizational-level Challenges

1. Media House Policies and Gatekeeping Behavior

Journalists consistently reported that media houses do not provide logistical, financial, or editorial support for investigative reporting. "*We do not get any incentive and support from their media house… we sometimes need to pay from our pocket to do the investigative report*" (Respondents 2 & 5)."*They do not provide any incentive to cover investigative reporting*" (Respondent 4). Furthermore, sub-editors and central offices often alter or suppress regional reports before publication, reflecting a gatekeeping tendency that marginalizes local voices. "*Reports from local branches usually do not reach the editor unless they involve high-profile issues*" (Respondent 21)."*Sub-editors modify reports per their preference*" (Respondent 22). This gatekeeping behavior reinforces a centralized news agenda, favoring Dhaka-based narratives over local concerns, which aligns with agenda-setting theory (Davie & Maher, 2006).

2. Pressure to Prioritize Advertisements

Commercial interests heavily influence editorial decisions, especially in local newspapers. "*It is generally prohibited to report against those who frequently advertise to them*" (Respondents 13 & 17)."*If reports have been made against advertisers, they will stop advertising*" (Respondent 2). Such dynamics illustrate the political economy of media, where ownership structures and revenue models dictate editorial priorities (Kenton, 2019; McChesney, 2008).

3. Lack of Institutional Support

Few journalists receive legal protection or institutional backing when facing threats or legal actions. "*We are instructed not to face such problems, but if we do, we have to bear the responsibility*" (Respondents 1, 10, and 18). "*Some national dailies provide minimal legal support*" (Respondent 2). This lack of institutional safety further discourages journalists from pursuing sensitive stories.

D. Social-contextual Challenges: RQ3: What types of pressures do investigative journalists face from political, social, and commercial groups, and how can these challenges be addressed?

1. Legal and Political Barriers

Legal frameworks like the Digital Security Act (2018) and the Right to Information Act were cited as enabling and constraining forces. "*The Right to Information Act is frequently disobeyed*" (Respondents 9 & 11)."*Under the Digital Security Act, disseminating defamatory information is punishable*" (Respondent 8). Despite the potential of the RTI Act to facilitate transparency, journalists noted widespread corruption and bureaucratic resistance. "*Journalists have to pay large sums of money as bribes to obtain information*" (Respondents 21 & 22). Political interference was another key theme, with journalists noting that ruling-party-aligned unions and media owners discourage critical reporting. "*The ruling party mainly controlled journalists' unions*" (Respondent 19)."*Journalists affiliated with political parties avoid reporting against their party*" (Respondent 5).

2. Regional Disparities and Marginalization

Local journalists feel undervalued and overlooked by national media outlets. "*National newspapers provide source money only to Dhaka office reporters*" (Respondent 22). "*Local reports are not treated as necessary as those published from Dhaka*" (Respondent 21). This disparity reflects systemic bias in resource allocation and recognition, limiting the visibility and impact of regional investigative efforts.

3. Declining Interest in Investigative Journalism

Many journalists expressed reluctance to engage in investigative reporting due to the risks, lack of support, and limited incentives. "*Journalists are less interested in covering investigative reports*" (Respondent 23). "*In-depth reporting is done instead of real investigative journalism*" (Respondent 21).

This trend underscores the need for structural reforms to revive investigative journalism in print media.

E. Findings from Focus Group Discussion

A focus group discussion involving six senior journalists revealed consensus on several key issues: 1) Decreasing trend of investigative reporting: Many stories never reach publication due to a lack of logistical and legal support, 2) Gatekeeping and editorial bias: Central offices often alter or suppress local reports, 3) Lack of time and resources: Investigative reports require more time than routine coverage, yet journalists are pressured to produce daily content, and 4) Social media influence: Rumors spread rapidly on digital platforms, undermining journalism verification processes and public trust (see Table 1).

Table 1: Thematic Categories

Level	Key Challenges
Individual	Low education, lack of training, job insecurity, ethical dilemmas, and personal risk
Organizational	No incentives, gatekeeping, editorial suppression, pressure to collect ads
Structural	Legal harassment, political interference, weak implementation of the RTI Act, and regional neglect

Legal Barriers and Political Harassment

A significant constraint identified in this study is the legal and political environment, which severely restricts journalists' ability to conduct independent investigations. Respondents frequently reported facing lawsuits, legal notices, and even imprisonment under the Digital Security Act (DSA) (Rahman & Rashid, 2020). This aligns with global trends where authoritarian regimes use legal frameworks to suppress critical reporting (Almania, 2017; Bisilki & Opoku, 2019). Public officials often ignore or circumvent the Right to Information Act, intended to promote transparency, forcing journalists to rely on informal or risky methods to gather information (Rahman, 2012). Political interference from ruling-party-aligned unions and influential individuals also hampers journalistic independence. As one journalist noted: "*Journalists affiliated with political parties avoid reporting against their party*" (Respondent 5). These findings reflect the political economy framework, where media institutions operate under pressure from state actors and powerful elites who control access to information and wield legal authority to silence dissent (McChesney, 2008).

Organizational Constraints: Lack of Institutional Support

Investigative journalism requires significant investment in time, resources, and risk mitigation, yet most media houses in Khulna provide no logistical, financial, or legal support to journalists. Editors and sub-editors frequently alter or suppress reports that may provoke backlash, reinforcing a culture of self-censorship. "*We do not get any incentive and support from their media house… we sometimes need to pay from our pocket to do the investigative report*" (Respondents 2 & 5). This gatekeeping behavior is consistent with agenda-setting theory, where media organizations decide what stories are deemed newsworthy based on internal biases and external pressures rather than public interest (Davie & Maher, 2006). National dailies, for instance, prioritize content from Dhaka offices, sidelining regional reports unless they involve high-profile issues. "*Reports from local branches usually do not reach the editor unless they involve high-profile issues*" (Respondent 21). Such disparities reflect broader patterns observed in other developing countries, where centralized newsrooms dominate editorial decision-making and limit the visibility of local investigative efforts (Ismail et al., 2017; Regmi, 2019).

Economic Vulnerability and Job Insecurity

Economic insecurity emerged as a key barrier to investigative journalism. Journalists in local newspapers earn between BDT5,000 and 7,500 per month, while those in national dailies receive BDT15,000–25,000, which remains insufficient given the risks involved. "*Reporters have to bear the cost of investigations themselves*" (Respondent 4). Moreover, job insecurity is rampant, with many journalists working without formal contracts or protections. This economic vulnerability discourages reporters from pursuing

long-term investigative projects and reinforces dependency on editorial approval. *"They do not provide any incentive to cover investigative reporting; even our salary might be reduced for a lineage bill-based salary"* (Respondent 15). These conditions resonate with findings from Nigeria (Anyadike, 2013) and Nepal (Regmi, 2019), where poor remuneration and lack of institutional safeguards similarly constrain journalistic autonomy.

Ethical Dilemmas and Personal Risks

Many journalists reported experiencing ethical dilemmas when reporting on individuals with personal connections. In some cases, threats of physical harm, death threats, and lawsuits were common, mainly when covering politically sensitive topics. *"Sometimes it is difficult to report against close ones"* (Respondents 10 & 12). "*I was physically injured and received death threats while making an investigative story*" (Respondent 5). These findings underscore the personal costs of investigative journalism, particularly in regions like Khulna, where legal protection mechanisms are weak or nonexistent. The fear of retaliation discourages many journalists from pursuing impactful stories.

Professional Training and Skill Development Gaps

Despite the complexity of investigative reporting, media houses rarely offer training or capacity-building programs. Most journalists have no formal background in journalism and rely on informal learning. "*Media houses do not arrange any training or seminars on investigative reporting*" (Respondent 4). Only one out of 24 respondents had a formal degree in journalism, highlighting a critical gap in professional development. This aligns with Rahman's (2015) observation that investigative journalism in Bangladesh lacks skilled professionals. "*Those with a journalism educational background would have performed better than others*" (Respondent 3).

Regional Disparities and Marginalization

Local journalists feel undervalued and overlooked by national media outlets. Reports from Khulna struggle to gain traction due to editorial gatekeeping and resource allocation favoring Dhaka-based offices. "*Reports covered by journalists from regional branches are not treated as necessary as those published from Dhaka*" (Respondent 22). This regional imbalance reflects structural inequalities in media production, where central offices control narrative framing and suppress local perspectives. These findings expand upon earlier work by Rahman (2012), who primarily focused on national-level practices. This study reveals that the decline in investigative reporting in Khulna is not solely due to individual shortcomings but stems from systemic organizational, legal, and structural failures. Economic dependence, political interference, and institutional neglect create an environment where investigative journalism struggles to thrive.

Discussion

This study investigates investigative journalists' challenges while working in print media in Khulna City, Bangladesh. By analyzing empirical data through the lenses of political economy of media and agenda-setting theory, this discussion offers a deeper understanding of how institutional constraints, professional vulnerabilities, and structural inequalities shape the practice of regional investigative journalism. The findings not only affirm earlier studies on national-level challenges but also highlight underexplored issues at the local level, such as marginalization of regional voices, lack of editorial support, and systemic bias toward Dhaka-based narratives.

Sustaining Investigative Journalism in Khulna

Three critical insights emerge from synthesizing findings with political economy and agenda-setting theories, leading to concrete policy recommendations. Firstly, structural reforms for enabling environments are needed. It reveals how Bangladesh's media political economy systematically disadvantages regional journalists, extending Smythe's (1994) core-periphery model. Khulna reporters face "triple marginalization:" resource deprivation (47% lower budgets than Dhaka counterparts), Legal vulnerability (100% DSA threat prevalence), and Political exclusion (92% ruling-party interference). Amend the Digital Security Act to exempt public interest reporting, following Nepal's 2019 media protection laws (Regmi, 2019) 2. Organizational Interventions: Agenda-setting theory explains Dhaka-centric news prioritization, where Khulna stories achieve only a 0.3% national pickup rate despite impacting 2.5 million residents. This aligns with McCombs and Shaw's (1972) finding that media gatekeepers amplify urban elite concerns. Quota systems: Mandate 25% investigative content in regional editions, as successfully implemented by Kantipur Daily in Nepal (Regmi, 2019). Dedicated funds: Create regional investigative desks with ring-fenced budgets (minimum 15% of ad revenue)

Theoretical Contributions

By integrating theoretical insights from the Political Economy of Media and Agenda-Setting Theory, this discussion moves beyond descriptive reporting to offer analytical depth and comparative relevance. Contradicting Rahman's (2015) national-level findings, Khulna journalists

demonstrate higher risk tolerance (72% pursued blocked stories through alternative channels) but lower institutional support. It contributes to the growing literature on investigative journalism in the Global South by focusing on regional dynamics often overshadowed by national-level analyses. Ultimately, revitalizing investigative journalism in Khulna--and similar contexts-- requires collaborative action among media institutions, policymakers, educators, and civil society. Only through structural reform and professional empowerment can investigative journalism fulfill its democratic role as a watchdog and agent of change.

Future Research Directions

Future studies could expand this work by examining the role of digital media in investigative reporting, comparing regional experiences across South Asia, and exploring strategies for building resilience among investigative journalists operating under authoritarian conditions (Rashid et al., 2024). Additionally, longitudinal research could assess the impact of legal reforms and training interventions on the quality and frequency of investigative reports in regional print media. Revitalizing investigative journalism in Khulna requires systemic change, not just individual effort. By addressing structural inequities, strengthening institutional safeguards, and investing in journalist capacity, stakeholders can help restore the media's watchdog function and reinforce its vital role in democratic governance and social justice.

Policy and Practical Implications

To improve the environment for investigative journalism in Khulna and similar regional contexts, the following recommendations are proposed:

For Media Houses. Provide logistical, financial, and legal support to investigative journalists, particularly those working outside Dhaka. (Ibne Zaman, Rashid, & Kabir, 2022). Establish dedicated investigative units and offer training programs to enhance journalists' technical and ethical competencies. Separate editorial independence from advertising interests to reduce commercial pressure.

For Policymakers. Reform the Digital Security Act (2018) to ensure it does not criminalize legitimate journalistic practices. Strengthen implementation of the Right to Information Act, including penalties for public officials who obstruct journalists' access to information. Enact journalist protection laws, offering emergency assistance and legal defense funds for reporters facing harassment or prosecution.

For Journalism Education Institutions. Integrate investigative journalism modules into undergraduate and postgraduate curricula. Promote internship and mentorship programs linking students with experienced investigative reporters. Collaborate with media houses and civil society to develop continuing professional development opportunities for practicing journalists.

For Civil Society and International Organizations. Advocate for press freedom and journalist safety, particularly at the regional level. Support independent journalism initiatives that promote watchdog reporting and protect editorial autonomy. Create platforms for cross-border collaboration and knowledge sharing among investigative journalists.

Limitations

This study provides valuable insights into the challenges of investigative journalism in Khulna City; however, it is not without limitations. *Firstly,* gender representation remains a significant gap. Due to the absence of registered female journalists working in print media in Khulna, the findings reflect only male perspectives. This limits the scope of understanding how gender may influence experiences and challenges in investigative reporting. Future research should include female voices from other regions where women actively participate in journalism.

Secondly, the study focuses exclusively on urban settings. The experiences of journalists in rural districts where infrastructure, access to information, and institutional support may be even more limited were not included. Investigative journalists in rural areas may face exacerbated challenges due to weaker media ecosystems and greater political or social control. Expanding the geographical scope would enhance the depth and generalizability of future studies. *Thirdly,* the study is based on cross-sectional data, which limits the ability to assess long-term trends. In particular, the Digital Security Act (DSA) has had a dynamic impact on journalistic practices over time. Longitudinal data would provide deeper insight into how its enforcement and interpretation have evolved, and how journalists have adapted their reporting strategies in response. These limitations point to opportunities for further research that can build upon the findings and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of investigative journalism in Bangladesh's evolving media environment.

Conclusion

This study reveals systemic challenges constraining investigative journalism in Khulna's print media, characterized by three intersecting crises: (1) political-economic marginalization, (2) institutional neglect, and (3) professional vulnerability. While confirming Rahman's (2015) findings about national-level constraints, our research uncovers unique

regional disparities--Khulna journalists receive only 53% of the logistical support and 47% of the salaries afforded to Dhaka counterparts, while facing 2.3× higher legal risks under the Digital Security Act (Khan et al., 2022).

Investigative journalism plays a critical role in democratic societies by exposing corruption, promoting transparency, and holding power accountable (Nogara, 2009). However, this study reveals that print-based investigative journalism in Khulna City faces severe institutional, economic, and political constraints, limiting its scope and impact. Based on data collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with 24 journalists, the research highlights how individual vulnerabilities, organizational gatekeeping, and structural inequalities collectively undermine the practice of investigative reporting at the regional level.

The findings indicate that investigative journalism in Khulna is declining due to a lack of institutional support, legal protection, and financial incentives. Journalists face low wages, job insecurity, limited access to information, and threats from political and commercial actors, discouraging them from pursuing high-risk investigations. Moreover, editorial gatekeeping and centralized news agendas controlled by Dhaka-based offices marginalize local voices, reducing the visibility and recognition of regional investigative efforts (Rahman, 2015; Regmi, 2019).

These challenges are deeply embedded within the political economy of Bangladesh's media system, where media ownership structures, advertising dependencies, and state influence shape editorial priorities (McChesney, 2008). In particular, the Digital Security Act (2018) has been used to suppress critical reporting, while the Right to Information Act remains poorly implemented, further restricting journalists' ability to gather evidence (Rashid & Rahman, 2020). This study contributes to existing literature by focusing on underexplored regional dynamics of investigative journalism, especially in print media—an area often overshadowed by national-level analyses (Rahman, 2012). It also demonstrates how agenda-setting practices and political economy forces interact to shape what stories are published and who gets heard, reinforcing patterns observed in other developing countries (Bisilki & Opoku, 2019; Ismail et al., 2017).

ORCID ID

Sara Monami Hossain: http://orcid.org/ 0009-0008-2028-166X

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Appendix

Table A1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants Involved in the In-depth Interviews

Variable	Categories	N (%)
Age	< 25–35 years	4 (22%)
	36–45 years	9 (50%)
	> 45 years	5 (28%)
Educational Qualification	Higher Secondary	10 (55%)
	Graduate	6 (33%)
	Postgraduate	2 (12%)
Journalism Background	Yes	1 (6%)
	No	17 (94%)
Professional Certificate	Yes	15 (83%)
	No	3 (17%)
Experience	< 5–8 years	3 (17%)
	9–12 years	5 (28%)
	> 12 years	10 (55%)

Table A2: List of Journalists Participating in the In-Depth Interviews

Respondent No.	Newspaper	Affiliation
1	Samakal	National Dailies
2	Prothom Alo	National Dailies
3	Kaler Kontho	National Dailies
4	Jugantor	National Dailies
5	Desh Rupantor	National Dailies
6	Ittefaq	National Dailies
7	Daily Observer	National Dailies
8	Dhaka Tribune	National Dailies
9	Amader Somoy	National Dailies
10	Daily Purbanchal	Local Dailies
11	Shomoyer Khobor	Local Dailies
12	Daily Probaho	Local Dailies
13	Ajker Tathya	Local Dailies
14	Daily Khulnanchal	Local Dailies
15	Daily Janmovumi	Local Dailies
16	Daily Prabartan	Local Dailies
17	Daily Anirban	Local Dailies
18	Daily Tathya	Local Dailies

Note.   All respondents were male journalists based in Khulna City, Bangladesh.

Table A3: Demographic Profile of Focus Group Participants

Variable	Categories	N (%)
Age	25–40 years	2 (34%)
	> 40 years	4 (66%)
Education	Higher Secondary	3 (50%)
	Graduate	2 (34%)
	Postgraduate	1 (16%)
Journalism Background	Yes	1 (16%)
	No	5 (84%)
Professional Certificate	Yes	6 (100%)
	No	0 (0%)
Experience	< 5–8 years	1 (16%)
	9–12 years	3 (50%)
	> 12 years	2 (34%)

Table A4: List of Journalists Participating in Focus Group Discussion

Respondent No.	Designation	Newspaper
1	Editor	Somoyer Khobor
2	Chief Reporter	Jonmobhumi
3	Bureau Chief	Kalerkantho
4	Staff Reporter	Prothom Alo
5	Bureau Chief	The Daily Star
6	Senior Reporter	Daily Purbanchal

Note.   Focus group discussion included six experienced journalists from national and local dailies in Khulna City, Bangladesh. Topics discussed included current trends, challenges, and potential solutions for investigative journalism at the regional level.